

Schell Collection

The Passion of a Collector

Concerning faithful companions

We all know them. We all own them. And some of us have even cursed, misplaced or lost them. They slip into the farthest reaches of our handbags and we swear that they sometimes run off and hide, but without them we are helpless: Keys!

Whether for the house door, the car, the office, bicycle, wall-safe or the cellar; keys are with us every day. We use them to lock up our belongings, keep some out of our private sphere and open it to those we choose. As familiar as we are with our iron friends, so little we usually know about them. Unless we have developed a love for our jingling companions, that is.

Infected with the collection fever

One such key lover is Hanns Schell, once a shareholder in the Odörfer Co., a hardware company which specialized in locking systems. He started collecting locks and keys more than 40 years ago, fascinated by the masterpieces of the past and stimulated by the padlocks that he acquired at the bazaars in Isfahan and Teheran. Over the years he added lockable chests and caskets, as well as chastity belts, offertory boxes and shackles to the collection. Hanns Schell can now look upon the world's largest collection of lockable objects.

In order to share his passion with others, he founded the Lock and Key Museum, the Schell Collection in Graz as it is called today, in the 1990s. Over 3 floors and 2.500 m², there are more than 13.000 objects from Europe, Africa and Asia in the Schell Collection. The specialty museum can be found somewhat hidden from view, but not far from the Old City of Graz near Lendplatz. The collection also reflects important aspects of the life of Hanns Schell. The first floor his role as an art dealer, the second his relationship to his company and the third floor displays his love of exotic lands and his passion for mountain climbing. Hanns Schell is also well-known as an extreme mountain climber having climbed mountains such as Nanga Parbat, Mohmil Sahr and Diran.

A different kind of museum

On the first floor the historical development of locking systems is shown ranging from the first primitive types through to the masterpieces of the 20th century. Chased, engraved, punched, blued, painted, etched – the locksmiths of the past spared no effort in creating true works of handcrafted art in contrast to today's everyday utensils. In addition, there are caskets exquisitely decorated with the most precious materials available; war chests with impervious locking mechanisms, miniature locks, as well as historical curiosities such as chastity belts and shaming stocks. The Odörfer Co. was the first hardware store in Styria which is why the museum is oriented towards iron as a material. Everyday objects made of cast iron can be found here next to intricate and delicate cast iron jewelry. A variety of forged business and guild signs are also displayed on this floor.

The third floor takes the visitor to Africa and Asia where they can discover the keys, locks, caskets and chests from these exotic continents.

At the highest level

The number of visitors to the private museum has grown steadily from year to year. Austrians ranging from children in kindergarten to senior citizens clubs have discovered the fascination of the world of locks and keys. Tourists the world over, as well as admirers and collectors of locking mechanisms come to Graz to visit this hidden jewel of a museum.

Mag. Martina Pall, folklorist and art historian has been the director of the museum for more than 10 years. The small, but all the more ambitious team consists of the conservator Manfred List and the researchers Rebecca Macher, Gerhild Rotter and Marion Schell who are responsible for the processing of the collection and the publication of the results of their research at the highest level. Every object in the collection has to be carefully described, measured and researched before it can be inventoried. This process concludes with interesting guided tours and text to accompany the exhibition. Seven books, six of those personally authored by Martina Pall serve as guides to the collection. The newest edition focuses on the "Locks and Keys" of the collection. Beautiful photographs and easy to understand descriptions ensure that everyone that has an interest in this topic can take part of the collection home with them.

A family project

The engagement of the Schell family is clear proof that the entire museum and the cumulative knowledge it represents will be preserved for a long time to come. Hanns Schell's son Christof has already assumed the responsibility for the museum and will assure that the work of the museum will continue into the future. This commitment shows that this private museum is more than just a great collection, but rather a place where knowledge will be maintained and passed on to later generations.

Translator: Wenn ich mich erlauben darf, ich glaube dass auch "cultural heritage" eine wichtige Phrase waere zu erwaehen in der letzten Satz. „...“, but rather a place where knowledge and cultural heritage will be maintained and passed on to later generations.“ Nur ein Vorschlag.